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**The Impact of Mexican Cinema on the
National Image and Spirit of Mexico**

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Mexican cinema has played an important role in the development of a national Mexican image as well as a more clearly defined concept of a national Mexican spirit. Even though cinema has only been in existence for slightly more than a century, its impact as a medium of mass communication has no match. A very large part of the total population from all social classes, economic levels, literacy levels and cultural backgrounds can have the common experience of viewing a work of cinematic art. Even though there will undoubtedly be many individual interpretations of what is seen, if the film is skillfully done its basic message will be able to reach the majority of viewers. For example, films from the Golden Age of Mexican cinema (from the 1940's to the 1960's) had a decided effect on the popular culture of all of Latin America as well as that of Spain. These films introduced many Mexican ideas, customs, and influences to all in the Spanish-speaking world. Aside from the introduction of the ideology and social views of the Mexican bourgeoisie to the rest of the continent, these films introduced Mexican music, performers, slang, and folklore to the masses. Mora¹ makes the claim that Mexican cinema has, indeed, practiced the same type of "cultural imperialism" that is often blamed on Hollywood. Mexican cinema has produced many such examples in a full range of films with comedy, melodrama and nationalistic themes being of notable frequency and importance. While entertainment value draws viewers; the skills of the writers, directors and actors keeps them coming back for more.

In the era of silent films from the 1890's until the advent of cinema with sound, most of the first films shown in Mexico were the same simple films usually photographed in Europe and available in the rest of the world. They were often very short and usually showed some sort of repetitive movement by the person being photographed. Their

attraction was based on the novelty of something new. Newsreels became common fare after 1910.² As the revolution was winding down between 1916 and 1920, more and more Mexican films were being made. There were some concerns on the part of the upper classes that all social classes mingled in the theaters. The popularity of police films was even questioned by some that thought it might teach an undesirable element how to fight back if they were being actually pursued by the police. The years between 1915 and 1923 have been termed the "Golden Age" of the Mexican silent cinema. Although it came nowhere near the production of Hollywood, it was still very significant by Latin American standards. The sheer production of Hollywood caught up by 1924 and no Mexican films were produced that year because of competition. At the same time many of the Hollywood films made about Mexico during this time were very degrading to the Mexicans and were never sent to Mexico for viewing. As sound was added to films in the 1930's, the quality of many Hollywood films became unacceptable to Mexican audiences because of the language barrier. English was not understood by most of the Mexican audiences and the Spanish often used in these first talking pictures was Castilian and likewise not understood. Since much of the audience was illiterate it was also useless to subtitle these films. The void created by the lack of acceptable films being available from Hollywood helped prompt a return to Mexican production.

By the end of the 1930's there were four principal cinematic formulas used in Mexican cinema.³ First, the *comedia ranchera*; second, the comedic farce; third, the historical epic; and fourth, the family melodrama. Many examples of each of these types of cinema helped to strengthen the nationalistic image of Mexico and the spirit of Mexico in varying degrees.

The *comedia ranchera* is a kind of cowboy musical that had elements of comedy, tragedy, music and folkloric themes. The hero was typically a *charro* (cowboy) much like the singing cowboys of Hollywood – Tex Ritter and Hopalong Cassidy. The *charro* usually was cast as a benevolent protector of society. The comedic farce was at its best with Tin Tan and Cantinflas. The historical epic dealt with patriotic narratives. The family melodrama dealt with patriarchal ideology while focusing on themes of home and religion.

The melodrama was a major theme of Mexican cinema from the mid-1930's to the early 1960's. Mexicans love a good tear-jerker and the melodrama proved to be a very popular way to bring this narrative style to the big screen. The actors suffer the many misfortunes of life on screen for the viewer who can “enjoy” the suffering without really sharing in it. Crying is a pleasure for those in the audience. General themes often focused on family and sexual conflicts. The melodrama proved a good fit with the other elements of Mexican culture such as the observance of the second of November (the day of the dead) and the tragic style of Mexican mural paintings. Directors of these productions had a great amount of control over the degree of support that their films gave to the themes of Mexican nationalism and national spirit.⁴

One of the main themes of Mexican cinema is the dichotomy of how women and men are viewed in Mexican society.⁵ Women are very often depicted as either virgins or whores. A recurring theme of the fallen women in many Mexican films starts with an innocent virgin who, usually through no fault of her own, is violated by an unscrupulous man. Because of the emphasis in Mexican society on the value of sexual purity outside of marriage, the woman on the big screen have little left after she has been violated

except a life in disgrace as a whore. Often the story line goes that she has to pay the price of her disgrace by an early death. In some cases she is able to atone for her “sins” by some life-long service to humanity – usually while suffering in poverty and solitude. The virgin is compared to the purity of the Virgin of Guadalupe, the Virgin Mother of Mexico, who consoles, quiets, dries tears and calms passion. The “fallen” women are compared to La Malinche, the mistress of Cortez who is viewed as the primeval traitor of her nation. Malinche is still considered the “Eve” figure in Mexican history. By supporting Cortez, the leader of the Spanish conquest, she is viewed as turning on her own Indian people and in doing so caused the psychological and political fall of Mexico. The machismo male, on the other hand, searches for two types of women from the time of his adolescence. He is looking for the ideal virginal female to be his bride. At the same time he is looking for the sexualized female to be his lover.⁶

One Mexican director in particular set about the task of establishing his particular version of a Mexican national image and spirit. The films of Emilio “Indio” Fernandez have been among the prime examples of the Mexican school of film.⁷ They are characterized by nationalistic ideas and they exalt a hypothetical Mexican spirit that is filtered through the eyes of the filmmaker.⁸ His concept of Mexican nationalism and Mexican spirit is an integral part of his films as he attempts to use his films as an instrument of social change.⁹ Perhaps his most famous film was “Maria Candelaria,” made in 1943. Starring Dolores del Rio, the film showed a very positive view of the Indian population. It was filmed in Xochimilco and presented a very tourist oriented view of the Indian population. It was boycotted by some of the important theatre chains of Mexico because Fernandez made “such shit about Indians” and it was shown

independently in a rented theatre. The film remained controversial but went on to be an award winner. Also important was "Rio Escondido," 1947. Again, the message of a chaste woman's service to society in the face of great adversity set the tone. Since film is seen as an effective way to reach the masses and affect social influence, Fernandez's films were made with the mass audience in mind instead of being aimed at the elite of the Mexican culture. This also meant that they were in a position to make more money because of their appeal to a much wider audience. Fernandez's films borrow heavily on the aesthetic vision of Eisenstein, the Soviet filmmaker.¹⁰

In the 1960's there was a change to realism in Mexican cinema. Almost all films were shot in documentary style. Outdoor, available light photography was used but often was filtered to soften images. Photographers did much more with hand-held cameras and took footage from real-life settings. The films that were produced during this period emphasized existing social problems.

Currently Mexican cinema has seen box office hits in those films that denounce corruption in high places. This cinema of denunciation normally starts with characters that are basically honest at first but are later corrupted as they gain power and prestige. They abuse their power in positions of church and state by acts of crime and immorality. Open discussion of such abuse of power is much more common now than it has ever been. Two of these films that were well received by their audiences but condemned by the church and state include "The Crime of Father Amaro," 2002 and "Herod's Law," 1999. Love and corruption exist together in the films. The films don't give answers but instead reveal cycles of corruption that repeat themselves endlessly.¹¹ They present a negative view of a very corrupt government. The films are like the murals of Diego

Rivera in that they show the stark contrast between the rich and the poor. Those in positions of power get most of the camera time while those living in poverty get much less emphasis. Denunciation of corruption and the abuse of power in these films reflect public distrust of both and state practices. Investigations of crimes of the 1970's against protestors, gays and peasants are a ready source of material for these films. Mexico has just recently seen the end of 71 years of one-party rule and the time for discussion of the corruption and the abuse of the past years has arrived.

While most Mexican films since the late 1950's have lacked much significance, one about the life of Frida Kahlo, the talented Mexican artist that led a scandalous life during the first half of the twentieth century has gained international respect.¹² *Frida* was directed by Paul Leduc and released in 1985. The film is an assemblage of sketches of the work and adversity of the bisexual Frida. She became an icon for feminism during the 1980's. A 2002 remake of the film had a much larger production budget than the original and also did quite well. The second film was filmed in Mexico and while having a mostly Mexican production crew it did have a director from Hollywood rather than from Mexico.

There are already approximately 5,000 Mexican films in existence making Mexico the largest producer of cinema – more than all other Latin America countries combined. There is real concern, however, about what effect the NAFTA treaty provisions will have on the Mexican film industry. Along with the collapse in the economy in the 1990's, the further loss of the government protectionism of past years will likely encourage Hollywood interests to become more involved in production of film that will appeal to the mass audiences of Mexico. Filming budgets for Mexican films are

already ridiculously low by Hollywood standards and are likely to get worse. The government subsidies and guaranteed loans previously available to Mexican filmmakers are mostly gone. Private money is usually only available for low-budget “entertaining” films that will likely return a fast profit on the investment.

It is expected that the Hollywood films will continue to emphasize the salable entertainment value of cinema rather than much of any nationalistic message. Current Hollywood films aimed at the Mexican audience already emphasize violence and sex – it seems to sell well there as it does in the United States. Melodrama has, however, made a reappearance in the 1990’s with an updated look taken from Italian neorealism.¹³ To the Latin citizen, all of political, economic and cultural life is really very much a melodrama. While much of the cinema market is being taken away by imports from Hollywood, the Mexican melodrama remains an identifiable product of Mexico.

Mexican cinema had many stereotypes-some good and some bad. However, the typical Mexican in most early films from Hollywood was defined in terms of being a mustachioed bandit that was cruel but dumb. He was both a drunkard as well as being an individual of low morality that was typically a thief. Likewise, Mexico has often been portrayed as a backward country that was inhabited by illiterate peasants. Hollywood has been particularly unkind to the image of those of Mexican heritage living in the United States. Many, if not most, of the films made north of the border featuring persons of Mexican heritage emphasize an image of violence, stupidity, immorality and drug use.¹⁴ This image has even been used in animated cartoons that are supposedly aimed at an audience of children. Far too often these films reinforced racial bias against Mexicans. They often emphasized the more bizarre parts of the culture including gangs, low-rider

cars and interracial violence. The events of the Sleepy Lagoon case of the so-called Zoot Suit riots of 1943 in Los Angeles are the subject of "Zoot Suit," 1981.¹⁵ Also demeaning are the comedies of the 1970's and 1980's starring Cheech and Chong as pot smoking ne'er-do-wells in Los Angeles.

In conclusion, Mexican cinema has been somewhat of a unifying force behind the establishment of a Mexican national identity and spirit that had been largely fragmented by the historical events that had taken place in Mexico-especially since the Conquest and the periods of revolution. The huge differences in social class and culture have also been overcome to some extent by having the common experience of the cinema available to the vast majority of the citizens of Mexico. While much of what has been filmed in Mexican cinema over the years provides mostly entertainment value (as is the case in Hollywood), the experience of the cinema seems to have helped level the playing field between the bourgeoisie and the very poor peasants. They at least have some degree of common experience as they watch films. Unfortunately, with advances in technology emphasizing satellite television and Internet feeds, the gap between the "haves" and the "have-nots" may actually worsen again. Many of the very poorest of the population will again be cut out of access to current information. More and more of the current Mexican films are now going straight to television, VHS, or DVD. While the peasant could probably afford the price of a movie every so often, he may never be able to afford the price of all of the equipment (or the availability of electricity) to access the newer releases.

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